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translingualism**

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### **“Your Own Goddamn Idiom:” Junot Díaz’s translingualism**

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the *fukú* of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its greatest European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of *fukú*, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours.

No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since. (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* 1)

This is how it begins, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz's first novel and the American National Book Critics Circle Award and Pulitzer Prize winner of 2008. It is a beginning full of beginnings--the beginning of slavery and the New World, of genocide and conquest, the beginning of Oscar Wao's biography. But it is also full of endings: the end of the indigenous Taino at the hands of Columbus ("the Admiral")'s troops, of Columbus himself, disgraced and crazy as he lay dying, of Oscar Wao, whose chronicle this is but whose death ("at the end") is foretold here, and the end of the Manhattan skyline that Oscar and his never-to-be-girlfriend watch, several pages later, from the Jersey shore, in a time before Ground Zero was Ground Zero and homeland insecurity hadn't been invented yet.<sup>1</sup>

Pregnant with portent then, this beginning boldly and beautifully re-writes the history of the Western hemisphere in three doom-laden sentences. These are sentences for Europe's crimes: its corruption of Africa and America, ground zero indeed, or *terra nullius* as the Europeans conceived of it, which was also paradise--Columbus writing in his letter of the first voyage that "Española is a marvel," more beautiful than Tenerife and "filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, and they seem to touch the sky." (33) Like olden-day skyscrapers, perhaps, these trees are, like golden-days Manhattan before 9/11, or like the "wordscrapers" Oscar and his n-t-b create as he courts her, unaware that she is his never-to-be. (*Oscar Wao* 36) Española, of course, is Hispaniola is Haiti of tragic past and present, but it is also the Dominican Republic, where Oscar Wao and his author hail from. Before Columbus "discovers" it in the novel as part of the Antilles on page one, the island has already been explored in the novel's epigraph, which cites Derek Walcott's epic poem *The Schooner Flight*. Its narrator Shabine "had a sound colonial education" but an even sounder

memory, back to “when these slums of empire were paradise.” (*Oscar Wao* n.p.) Española as Utopia and dystopia then, no-place or this-nightmare-place.

Walcott’s naming of the *mélange* that is Caribbean identity, post Caliban’s colonial education, is perfect as an introduction to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, whose narrator, name of Yunió, speaks to us in a translingual mix of scifi, Spanish, Elvish and English, languages and registers too heterogeneous to identify.<sup>2</sup> Richard Patteson insists therefore that the polyphony of Díaz’s narrative voice makes this novel a quintessentially Caribbean one, “in which multiple linguistic and cultural origins combine with an imperative to mutate.” (18) Convincing as this is, to try and pin *Wao* down in this geo-literary way however is to miss—precisely—the fluidity and translingual, *transnational* reach of Yunió’s voice, which connects the Caribbean with the growing diaspora of Latin@s in the United States and whose Spanish/English bilingualism renders it truly a voice of the Americas, plural.

Bharati Mukherjee accordingly identifies Díaz, together with other immigrant writers like Edwidge Danticat and Gary Shteyngart, as an exemplar of American “literature of new arrival,” for whom “English is not the mother tongue and who have no intention of wilfully erasing their premigration linguistic and historical inheritance.” (683; 681) By contrast with immigrant writers of a century ago, who “were grateful to the US for asylum and opportunities for self-betterment” and who desired “assimilation into America . . . for their US-born offspring,” Mukherjee argues, the writing of these new immigrants “embraces broken narratives of disrupted lives, proliferating plots, outsize characters . . . the fierce urgency of obscure history [and] the language fusion (Spanglish).” (683)<sup>3</sup> In the analysis of Díaz’s translingualism that follows, I shall highlight two of the characteristics she identifies in

this “literature of new arrival:” what she calls “bilingual” narrative discourse—which, in *Oscar Wao* is a complex hybrid of English, Spanish, and interjected words and phrases from artificial fantasy languages—and inherited trauma from the native country, which is imported into the US. These features of Díaz’s novel are, as we shall see, intimately bound up with each other, because the very “broken narrative of disrupted lives” Mukherjee writes about accurately describes the brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao as rendered in Yunior’s language-fusing voice, “obscure history,” “proliferating plot,” “outsize character” and all.

“(dique):” translingualism and transnationalism in the literature of new arrival

The brief and wondrous life of Oscar Wao is told at breakneck speed in what appears to be an oral discourse, consisting in part of youth in-speak peppered with popular cultural references to fantasy and sci fi (“Sauron’s evil”), of American hip-hop expressions (“dude,” “homeboy”), of allusions to the Western canon (“House Atreus”) and of Spanish slang derived from the speech of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, and South American Americans (“It’s all true, plataneros”) (156, 152, 155).<sup>4</sup> Yunior narrates the life of his friend as Nick Carraway tells Gatsby’s story, out of fascination, intrigued as he is by the wondrousness of Wao’s commitment to fantasy and appalled as he also is by the tragic brevity of Oscar’s existence on planet earth. Lived under the long and dark historical shadow of the Dominican Republic’s most notorious dictator, Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961), this life is told in a highly fragmented way. As Yunior begins to realise just how much his friend’s unhappy story is interwoven with that of his mother, Beli, and grandfather, Abelard, both of whom suffered

under Trujillo, he discovers that his own hyper-sexual masculinity may have played a part in determining Oscar's awful end, which makes the telling of it also an act of contrition.<sup>5</sup>

Yunior's discourse is complex and variegated because these are no American-ordinary lives. He echoes Oscar's view of Dominican identity and the almost unimaginable fusion of reality and fantasy that happens under the arbitrary yet absolute rule of a dictator: "who more scifi than us?" (21) In order to render the ridiculous and preposterous as the real, Yunior's narration thus needs the numerous historical ("the world-famous Mirabal sisters") and intertextual ("the brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao," for starters) references Díaz endows him with.<sup>6</sup> He combines such readerly references, furthermore, with high and low cultural registers, standard and slang locutions, and creates new ones in the process. Often, such a creative newword fuses English with Spanish, as in "if the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world's first culocracy," "culocracy" highlighting the fantastical but also highly sexualized nature of El Jefe ("The Chief," Trujillo)'s power. (217)<sup>7</sup>

At other times a single word, strategically placed by Díaz whilst sounding like a perfectly natural interjection on Yunior's part, can bring a world of cultural difference into the dominant English of *Wao's* narrative discourse. Take, for example, "(dique)" in the opening extract above, which is instructive on the first page of a Dominican American novel: look it up in the dictionary and you find "dike." This can make *some* kind of sense in the context of Columbus's landing and the question of what or who could possibly have held back the tide of European "discovery," but in the sentence where it occurs, amid "hearing divine voices," it makes no sense at all. Look further therefore, and find that the online *Urban Dictionary* gives "Dominican slang for 'supposedly' or 'so they say'" and that sounds

right here. Whilst “fukú” may be a Díaz invention of obvious American English-gone-global derivation, the modest (in brackets) presence of “dique,” if my theory that it comes from the French “on dit que” is correct, introduces from the beginning a word of Haitian creole heritage into Dominican American writing.<sup>8</sup>

This is significant, since much of the novel’s representation of Dominican racial politics revolves around the “taint” of blackness that is conspicuously displaced onto Haitians and used as a race-and-class slur. In the familiar hierarchy of skin tone that is often called the pigmentocracy of the region, Haitians occupy the bottom rung. Oscar’s sister Lola, for example, riles her mother in a restaurant in the Zona Colonial, where the waiters look down on them as outsiders, by telling her “they probably think you’re Haitian,” to which Beli’s retort is “la única haitiana aquí eres tú, mi amor” (the only Haitian here is you, darling (276)).<sup>9</sup> “(dique)” thus obliquely does cultural and political work at the level of the novel’s translingual discourse that its narrative belies, but cannot quite undo.

And what “taints” people also “taints” language: as V. N. Voloshinov wrote, “a word is the purest and most sensitive medium of social intercourse,” so that “*the word functions as an essential ingredient accompanying all ideological creativity whatsoever.*” (14-15)<sup>10</sup> An understanding of all language as rooted in the social, specifically in human *interaction*, enables us to think of Díaz’s decision to have Yuniors interject “(dique)” into his opening statement about the fukú that reportedly fucked up Oscar Wao’s life, in a very particular way: as linguistic material that imports not just an alien shape and sound, but more importantly an ideological charge from another culture into the English textual environment. In so doing, Díaz makes a political intervention, in that he declares by implication his solidarity with Haiti and Haitian(s) in the very act of telling his Dominican



trauma story and *with that tiny word*. This is striking because, as the linguist John Lipski observes, “Dominicans are reluctant to admit any influence,” yet “popular Dominican Spanish contains demonstrable Haitian traces,” just as—we might add--Dominican people contain demonstrable traces of Haitian races too. (13)<sup>11</sup>

Fear of contamination of standard languages by their colonially-produced creoles and fear of miscegenation have historically been intertwined, of course, and current US anxieties that hegemonic American English is threatened by the Spanish of new immigrants are a direct legacy of such nineteenth century fetishization of purity. Díaz’s insertion of “(dique)” into his English sentence therefore does not just signal caution to the reader, warning her and him of the speculative, hearsay nature of the story they are about to read—this is important, but for that purpose he could have used “(so they say).”<sup>12</sup> Díaz’s daring is that the translingual word “(dique)” introduces language-mixing, *creolisation* and with it miscegenation as a fundamental feature of his literary discourse, one that Anglo readers have to come to terms with if they really want to read him.

This takes work, the kind of work that immigrants have to do as they learn the language of their new world.<sup>13</sup> Díaz himself has said about this in interview that, having learnt English as an immigrant child, “there’s English acquisition and then there’s *English* acquisition, that there is this almost endless array of vernaculars that you have to pick up,” not just expressions or accents but also the lingo of sports, TV, popular music, or “comic books, fantasy, and science fiction [which] are like a very vibrant, alive, and *very* American language.” (Díaz, Shook and Celayo 14) In Díaz’s narrative discourse and Yunió’s voice, the American vernacular of references to comics, scifi and fantasy holds equal status with standard English, with high-cultural intertextuality and with Spanish words and phrases,

which bring what Lori Ween has called a “Latin feel” to the texture of his prose that does not, however, become “an essentializing notion that allows the market to categorize and define a type of writing.” (129)<sup>14</sup> Rather, it does the opposite: in combination, conjugation and cohabitation these languages and registers become an idiolect, or as Díaz typically puts it, bluntly and clearly: “your own goddam idiom. You just create this entire language, and in some ways it holds you together.”(Díaz, Shook and Celayo, 14).

Díaz’s “own goddamn idiom” is so densely layered, so original and obtrusive as to remind of Toni Morrison’s dictum that “the most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language—its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language.” (“Unspeakable Things,” 11). Morrison is an important ghost in the machine of “creating a language that can hold us together” in *Oscar Wao*, and here she draws particular attention to the political nature of certain kinds of culturally and/or racially marked vernaculars which, *in their “taintedness,”* can stage a revolution in poetic language too.<sup>15</sup> Díaz’s prose in *Wao* shakes up hierarchies and forces you to look at words and worlds a different way: “(dique)” implicitly critiques Dominican disavowal of blackness and the racial division (mapped onto class) of two nations sharing the same island that comes with it. His “own goddamn idiom” therefore is not just a vehicle for his political agenda, but the very *substance* of it.

And so, if Díaz does create a revolution in the poetics of immigrant writing, then perhaps José David Saldívar’s bold statement that with the publication of *Wao* “American literature changed forever” may be less overstated than it at first appears. (“José David Saldívar discusses,” 17) In his first collection of short stories, *Drown*, he used Spanish

and youth-speak liberally, but advisedly, that is: ethnographically, much like European immigrants of the early twentieth century let their native language wander into their English sentence occasionally, when describing life in the old country.<sup>16</sup> As a result, *Drown* is much easier on the monolingual eye, the more so as its appended glossary caters to the implied Anglo reader's desire for semantic transparency.<sup>17</sup> *This Is How You Lose Her*, his latest book, similarly accommodates that reader, as Yunior's voice now appears to have settled down in a dominant English permitting only the occasional Spanish incursion. No such compromises are made in *Wao*, and this is what makes up its newness, its daring and its challenge to the reader to keep up or give up. To see how analysis of the text's fabric--even at the micro-level of a single letter--can take us from translingual practice to trauma and hence back to Mukherjee's "literature of new arrival," we need to return to the novel's opening paragraph. We then find that it is Yunior's "todologos" itself that enacts the novel's "seditious, confrontational . . . masking and unmasking" political message. (214)<sup>18</sup>

"broken lives, disrupted narratives:" the importation of trauma

Yunior wants to explain nothing less than how the U of Utopia—etymologically no-place, but a paradisaical good place in Thomas More's euphonic naming of it as a fictional island in the Atlantic--became the U of the *Untilles* ("until we can go to America/ until the US rescues us") or of "this uncountrry" (as Beli calls the Dominican Republic elsewhere) and how it morphed into a dystopia, from Columbus onwards, where violence and terror reign. (259; 128) Along the way, Díaz shows how Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship and American

involvement in the Caribbean make for today's Dominicans becoming new Americans, fleeing and having fled, themselves the offspring of Europeans and of slaves.<sup>19</sup> These slaves' screams on page one, first sentence, announced the coming of the New World and are heard in Oscar Wao's family's saga still, as each generation falls victim to the terror and violence of Trujillo's henchmen and their own bravely misguided defiance of it, all in the name of love. Just as Beli is nearly beaten to death ("like she was a slave") in a canefield and traumatized for life by Trujillo's thugs, so also is Oscar first savagely assaulted and in the end shot by Trujillo's indirect heirs. (147) These are the heavies set on him by "el capitán," member of the secret police and lover of Ybón, a prostitute whom Oscar has fallen in love with. Something as ostensibly personal as love therefore is, in both cases, deeply political because the patriarchal, heterosexist and misogynistic ethos of the dictatorship seeps down into private life and turns it toxic. Oscar dies in a place where "the smell of the ripening cane was unforgettable," which olfactory memory takes us back to Beli's beating, slavery and the fukú that "first came from Africa." (320)<sup>20</sup> Because US complicity with DR barbarity is a time-honoured tradition, Oscar's status as a US citizen makes no difference at all: "the embassy didn't help and neither did the government;" there can be no US rescue in the face of a history of invasion (as Yuniór reminds us, in 1917) and a present of restless, on-going migrancy. (323)

That the US is no safe haven or refuge for any Dominican platanero/a is clear throughout and part of Díaz's revision of the old European immigrant saga. Somewhere in between Beli's near-fatal beating that sends her in exile to "Nueba Yol" and Oscar's demise in the canefield, his eight year old sister Lola is sexually abused by a stranger back in New Jersey, but finds no solace at home. Instead Beli routinely beats her, repeating the violence

she herself had been helplessly subjected to in her youth. She has a “*scar as vast and inconsolable as a sea*” on her back to remind us of both her childhood as a “*criada*” (or virtual slave) in the DR and her similarity to Sethe, the escaped slave mother in Morrison’s *Beloved*. (51) Since to discipline and punish is all the mothering she knows how to do, Beli eventually sends Lola back to the “*uncountry*” where the cycle of violence began. “And that is how I ended up in Santo Domingo,” Lola later explains to Yunior. (70)

Díaz’s families, relationships and individuals are riven and scarred and, in Beli’s case, also silenced by trauma, so that Yunior’s task in piecing this family saga together is an exercise of imagination (“who more scifi than us?” after all) as much as documentation.<sup>21</sup> Trauma incapacitates conscious memory but activates its unconscious power, so that Beli’s DR history, as Yunior describes it, “got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul.” (258) Lola voices the havoc that dictatorship wreaks on the souls of its citizens: “Ten million Trujillos is what we are,” she says to Yunior after Oscar’s death, swearing “that she would never return to that terrible country.” (324) And so, much as Yunior tries to keep control of this narrative, there can be—as he repeatedly warns us—no complete or reliable remembering in *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao*, only construction and reconstruction, with several páginas en blanco that can never be filled in, not with all the words in the world. Lola knows, and shows him, that broken relationships, thwarted lives, vanishing menfolk and abusive parenting are but new ways of living out the Dominican trauma—call it fukú—of her parents and grandparents: “if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in.” (209)

“The only way out is in” is an admonishment to confront the past, which is never left behind but always remains part of the immigrant’s baggage. Trauma is, as Israel Zangwill knew and demonstrated in that supposedly most assimilationist icon of “old immigrant” writing, *The Melting Pot* (1907), not left behind in the Russia of Tsarist pogroms but imported to the United States along with the samovar and the siddur (the Hebrew prayerbook). But if this is a point of resemblance between the literature of “new arrival” and that of the “old immigrants,” it is only apparently so: *The Melting Pot* plays itself out entirely on American soil, and if it addresses imported trauma as one of its themes, it is a minor one, serving mainly to highlight how the United States provides refuge from such trauma. Not so in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* where the US offers no escape; “the only way out is in” forces the reader to grapple with the novel’s “unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language” as a means of processing, *working through* its nightmarish twentieth century Dominican subject matter that makes itself felt in the United States and into the twenty first. Such working through has no redemptive function, however; it is, rather, an act of remembering and revealing what Ramón Saldívar describes as “the relentless beatings, rapes, murders, tortures, and other lesser cruelties and gleeful sadisms perpetrated in the names of (say) love, ethics, rights, justice or freedom” under any dictatorship-- Trujillo’s massacre of Haitians in 1937 is an example. (595)

Geoffrey Hartman has written that “as a specific literary endeavour trauma study explores the relation of words and wounds,” and I am suggesting that Díaz does the same in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. (259) In Dominican history he does not have to look far: that same massacre which was Trujillo’s most determined effort at ethnic cleansing,

reputedly (dique) hinged on a single word: whoever could not pronounce “perejil” in the Dominican way (that is: with a Spanish rolling R instead of the French/Creole guttural one) was killed.<sup>22</sup> Or take the words “lo siento,” in the intensely painful-to-read passage where Beli, “*her bra slung about her waist like a torn sail,*” examines her breasts and asks Lola, “*Don’t you feel that? . . . Coño, muchacha, stop looking at me and feel,*” whereupon her daughter duly *feels* and says “*Lo siento.*”(53)<sup>23</sup> Poignant here is Beli’s brash injunction (“for fuck’s sake, girl”) for Lola to *feel*, not the breastful of motherly love but the lump that spells cancer, and more so the daughter’s response (“I feel it”) that is also “I’m sorry,” both contained in the Spanish “lo siento.” The cancer in Beli’s breast, erstwhile so magnificent a breast “only a pornographer or a comic-book artist could have designed . . . with a clear conscience,” evokes the cancer that eats away at the utopia, cornucopia of the Antilles, “the fresh, green breast of the new world” Fitzgerald wrote about at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. (92)

In addressing (“the only way out is in”) massacre at the national and cancer at the personal level of intertwined histories, Díaz not only suggests that “the Spanish conquest has *disrupted* the Edenic society instead of *creating* one,” as Emily Shiflette writes, but he also inscribes the trauma (the wound) of both at the material level of the word. (10) His originality comes into view if we compare it to Edwidge Danticat’s prose, which deals with similar traumatic histories and likewise brutalized people, but in a much more conventional style, that is: in standard English with a few words of Creole thrown in that are almost always translated.<sup>24</sup> His writing is so powerful and so original not because of *what* is being told (much of that, Hemingway-like, goes under the surface) but by virtue of *how* it is done, with the Spanish and the fantasy and scifi references and the high-literary intertextuality all

forming part of the *linguistic* texture of the novel that resonates, reverberates even, with other stories, histories, and meanings, like some kind of textual unconscious yet to be discovered. Critics like Daniel Bautista, Tim Lanzendörfer, T.S. Miller and A.O. Scott furthermore convincingly argue that allusions and references to fantasy, comic book and science fiction (of which I know less than zero) in Díaz's novel are by no means ignorable add-ons, but function as a third language besides English and Spanish, resonating with denotative and connotative meanings. Lanzendörfer goes so far as to suggest that the novel's fantasy references are "more subversive" than the presence of Spanish is to those who do not know it, and that without knowledge of the popular cultural references Díaz so liberally endows Yunió's narration with, we probably aren't "really getting it." (136)

Mere awareness of what those references refer to however is not enough, since reading *Wao* is not a simple exercise in decoding, but really one of interpretation, as perusal of *The Annotated Guide to the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, compiled online by a person or persons called Kim, demonstrates. In an Introduction to the resource Kim explains how reading the novel "was extremely slow going since I needed my laptop nearby the entire time, with Wikipedia, Google, and Google translate open . . . unless I wanted to miss out on half of the story," which occasioned the idea of a web-based commentary. (n.p.) Kim doesn't tell us whether the information this Wikipedia-like, crowd-sourced attempt at exegesis provides really enabled a better understanding of *Wao's* narrative, but the many contributors' comments to the annotated *Oscar Wao* suggest that Díaz has a distinctive fanbase of fantasy, scifi and comics lovers who enthusiastically shine their light on the text's many occlusions. *The Annotated Guide to the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* connects you to a community of readers who are only too glad to share their specialist knowledge



("Oscar Wao is all about embracing your inner geek, right?" Kim asks rhetorically) so you quickly realise you are not alone in grappling with Díaz's translingualism and multifarious references (many of which do not even announce themselves as such in the text). This is quite novel and rare in the study of contemporary literature and the commentary's coverage is quite exhaustive: it runs to no fewer than 67 pages.

Despite containing a great deal of information to elucidate the novel's many buried references ("Anacaona was a Taino queen;" "Robotech is an 85-episode adaptation of three different anime television series") the guide's ultimate usefulness in really helping us understand *Wao's* translingual dimensions and their radical semantic implications is doubtful. Knowing what "jojote" means does not improve my reading all that much; in fact, I have already forgotten its translation, though not the word itself nor its derogatory connotation, which prompted me to look it up in the first place. And this—retention of the "foreign" word, its look, its sound, its feel in the mouth as I, an Anglo speaker, nearly choke trying to pronounce it—is surely the point of Díaz's multilingual, multicultural, omnivorous writing. *Really* reading translingual literature means letting the words do their own thing; translation will not do. And neither will explication suffice: that "Darkseid" refers to "a fictional character that appears in comic books published by DC Comics" is one thing, but such a point of information becomes meaningful only when read creatively, with eyes and ears open to the look and sound of that word. (5) If we adopt Reed Way Dasenbrock's useful distinction between intelligibility (translation, denotation) and meaningfulness (signification, resonance) then Darkseid becomes interesting, as it rhymes and chimes with the dark side of the history of the Americas that Díaz is excavating here, in his examination of the Trujillo dictatorship and other forces of terror, stretching all the way back to Columbus.

Furthermore, as T.S. Miller writes, "the real significance lies in Díaz's juxtaposition of sf with

other discourses;” you can find allusions to Melville’s *Bartleby* side by side with Asimov and will have to think of the ramifications of them appearing together when figuring out what it all might mean. (94) Reading Junot Díaz, the mind boggles.

And this, too, fits in with the notion of trauma writing. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz refers to real-life trauma when she identifies the “sluggishness and unawareness with which . . . catastrophes enter the consciousness of those afflicted;” she highlights Díaz’s responsibility in not just appeasing “the ghosts that still haunt . . . the Dominican diaspora” but also “making readers in faraway nations . . . learn to empathise with and to transform their perception of their ‘traumatized condition’ through art.”(145) If, as we saw above, this is not a redemptive function of the text but rather a political, consciousness-raising one, it – like the online annotated guide to the novel—has a democratic effect: because Díaz, as Rune Graulund writes, “implements a politics of exclusion, actively forcing his readers to accept that parts of his text will likely remain indecipherable to them,” he paradoxically achieves a kind of *inclusion* at the same time. His wide and diverse range of allusion flatters many readers, from self-identified sci fi nerds to literature buffs through to young Latin@s and readers in other parts of the world, who recognize the parallels between Nazi and Stasi, *Ton Ton Macoutes* and SIM.<sup>25</sup>

The new immigration and Díaz’s “goddamn idiom”

If we now return to Mukherjee's "literature of new arrival" and its departure from the conventions of immigrant American literature of old, we can see that in its insistence on transnational continuities (rather than new beginnings), the importation and re-enactment of trauma (rather than leaving sorrow behind), and the need to confront the troublesome history of the old country (rather than to adapt to the new) *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a tale of a new kind of "new" Americans. Part of their newness is that they insist they were always already *Americans* (*pace* Columbus)--even if not previously resident in the United States. Mukherjee's question, "how exactly does the immigrant absolutely renounce[s] her earlier self, her fidelity to family history and language 'without any mental reservation of purpose of evasion?'" as the oath of naturalization demands, is of no concern for Díaz and his characters: they simply refuse any such renunciation. (681) In a further departure from the old literature of American immigration, they do not believe that the US provides any kind of refuge from suffering either and they see no scope or hope for fulfilment of some exceptionalist dream.

As if echoing Mukherjee's own novel of new arrival, *Jasmine*, in which the US border is no barrier against transnational violence, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* torturers live side by side with the refugees who tried to escape them and they are as welcome in the US as is their victims' cheap labour. Of the Capitán, agent of Oscar's demise and well-versed in all kinds of torture, Yunior writes: "I know this guy well. He has family in Queens and every Christmas he brings his cousins bottles of Johnnie Walker Black." Oscar's protest that he is an American citizen and therefore has rights is, as we saw earlier, futile: the capitán simply counters that he is an American citizen too, with Yunior adding, to highlight the bitter irony of this fact, "Motherfucker even had first world teeth." (295) Any

illusion that Dominicans migrate to the US for safety or a better life is shattered in Díaz's representation of the process. It is violence and poverty ("the mind boggling poverty," four times repeated, on page 277) that drive Dominicans to the US--and pull them back again: "the only way out," after all, "is in."

There are real-life corollaries to this back-and-forth movement and the refusal to renounce native allegiance. With the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Reform Act and the re-election of Joaquín Balaguer's right wing regime in the Dominican Republic a year later, governments of both countries "saw emigration as a way to dissipate threatening political tensions, i.e. to get rid of dissidents and to eliminate an excess of unneeded unskilled workers," Flores writes. (11) Furthermore, Jose Itzigsohn and Carlos Dore-Cabral observe in their study of Dominicans in the US that they "certainly hold on strongly to their national identity" and "socialize mainly with other Dominicans," just as Yunió and his friends do in *Oscar Wao*. (243; 233) Young people of the second generation do show their transculturation in that they "adopt the hip-hop style of African-American and Puerto-Rican youngsters," yet the percentage of Dominicans who are naturalized and have become US citizens *by choice* is low, the sociologists write. (240; 233) New communications technologies, affordable air travel and the proximity of the Caribbean enable frequent contact between the two countries as well as regular visits, so that Dominican American lives and identities are far more transnational than were those of the immigrants of old.<sup>26</sup>

All this—real-life transnational migration and its representation in Díaz's work—therefore is a far cry from the American immigration of a century ago. Its literature was primarily concerned with the differences between Old and New worlds, the exigencies of learning English and adapting to the American way of life, and was in important respects a

response to the Americanization movement's fervent demand that immigrants be made over into bona fide Americans in the shortest time possible.<sup>27</sup> *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* inverts all tropes of immigrant literature as we know or might imagine it; it has no sentimentality or nostalgia for the homeland nor does it enthuse about American education or curry favour with its readers by relating the difficulties of migrant existence. Instead of embracing or being deeply disillusioned with it, Díaz's narrative radically decentres the United States: most of the narrative is set in the DR, whereas life in New Jersey is taken for granted and represented as normal, or even mundane.

Again, a single word of Díaz's forging, "Domo," encapsulates all this: clearly its look and sound evoke the Dominican Republic, but morphologically there is an echo of "home" (from the Latin "domus") too. (180) Yunió refers to Oscar with this term, yet the home of the "homeboy" of its meaning is surely the United States. "Domo" thus collapses both meanings into a single word, signifying "Dominican American, like me." This is important to note, because "Domo" occurs with reference to Oscar in the very passage that explains how Wao got his weird name:

Who the hell, I ask you, had ever met a Domo like him? . . . I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. . . Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that. . . And the tragedy? After a couple of weeks, dude started *answering* to it. (180)

Much is compacted into these lines, too much to unravel here—certainly with regard to the oppressive definition of Dominican masculinity that helps to determine Oscar Wao's unhappy demise. Remember Mukherjee's mention of "outsize characters" as one of the characteristics of the "literature of new arrival;" here we see how the overweight Oscar de

Léon, renowned for his nerdy knowledge of all things fantasy and scifi, but also for his excessively, eccentrically formal speech (“she is orchidaceous,” “I am lacking in pulchritude”) gains the nickname Oscar Wilde, Hispanically pronounced “Wao,” and becomes the butt of a homophobic, translingual aural joke. (35; 176) Oscar’s Dominican masculinity, already questionable since he is still a virgin at this point, is further put in doubt here: his use of elaborate, Latinate language feminizes him, so that “Domo” comes to rhyme with “homo” in this passage—if not in the end.<sup>28</sup>

In drawing such ostensibly wild and random transhistorical and transatlantic, transcultural parallels as these, which point us to Wilde or Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* as easily as to H.P. Lovecraft, or Stephen King, Toni Morrison or Marvel Comics, Díaz’s newness comes to the fore: Yunió’s narrative voice is unlike any other and the language that voice forges out of disparate parts is by turns hilarious, mordantly sarcastic, poetic (“she had her gloves in one hand like a crumpled bouquet”) or crude (“did he ever thumb her clit?”), but always startling in its jarring disjunctiveness and eye-hooking originality. (37; 40) Far from wanting to prove his American credentials, as the immigrant writers of the twentieth century tended to do, Díaz is interested in making connections across culture and across the world. His implied reader, who is a Spanish/English bilingual devoted to Tolkien, Alan Moore and *Fantastic Four*, yet also on familiar terms with *Beloved*, the American Modernists and the longueurs of “those nightmare eight-a.m. MLA panels” is new, so new that s/he may not even fully exist yet. (299) His English, mixed-up registers and all, is new and his Spanish is new and the combination, apparently effortlessly transposed from speech into writing, is nothing like you have ever read before. It makes for a potent literary language, like Zora Neale Hurston’s, or that of Mark Twain before her and Salinger’s Holden Caulfield since. But

with this difference: no concessions are made to the monolingual reader. Add to this a minimalist approach to punctuation, so that dialogue and narrative discourse dike-lessly (dique) flow into each other, in the same way that Spanish and English appear undifferentiated, fontwise, on the page and you have a recipe for highly unlikely success. That the unlikely happened all the same is—paradoxically--due, I think, to Díaz's uncompromising stance on his creative practice and on the kinds of readers he wants to reach. These, he has said in interview, are people like his friends, who “are not interested in Heidegger:”

I feel I'm not . . . a native informer. I don't explain cultural things, with italics or with exclamation or with side bars or asides. I was aggressive about that because . . .so many Latinos and black writers . . . are writing to white audiences . . . If you are not writing to your own people, I'm disturbed about what that says about your relationship to the community you are in one way or another indebted to. You are only there to loot them of ideas, and words, and images so that you can coon them to the dominant group. (Díaz, Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 903; 900)

That final phrase, in which the “looting” of ideas and the “coonning” of them to an implicitly white public are indicative, again, of Díaz's subject position as a person of color, highlights his awareness of the exploitative power-relations that have blighted earlier African American and “ethnic” writers in cultural production and reception. Lourdes Torres has described Díaz's writing as “gratifying the bilingual reader,” because he does not tag his Spanish words as foreign, leaves them untranslated and often uses the kinds of slang that cannot be found in a dictionary anyway. (83) If she is right in observing that “when reading texts by cultural others, mainstream readers expect to gain access to other worlds, not to be

made aware of their limitations” then cultural outsiders like me (presumably) should feel affronted by *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. (82) Yunior’s narration reminds us of our ignorance on every other page, and takes no prisoners when it comes to pointing that out and rubbing it in (“For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history...”). (2) Distancing, or even alienating your readers is not normally a stratagem for success, yet Díaz has a canny explanation for the perverse logic of the literary marketplace: “They’re so happy to claim me as literature because it makes them all look better. They don’t want to relegate me to areas of ethnic studies. . . . The suggestion seems to be ‘You’re one of us now.’ . . . They want me mainstream.” (Díaz, Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 905)

True as this may be, and much as Díaz likes to attribute his success to luck rather than talent, the idea that the liberal establishment is merely out to flatter itself by being so “inclusive” and so signed up to “diversity” as to reward--what Rune Graulund calls--“the rhetorical punches and kicks served to the reader” with prize after award after glowing review, underplays the impact *Oscar Wao* in particular has had on how we read—and may well write in future. (46) Like Morrison’s *Beloved*, it sets its own standard for how it wants to be read, making demands on, but not intimidating the reader. Whatever the literary signification of all the popular and elite intertextual references may be, their *cultural* effect is one of levelling: you can consider yourself just as much an expert reader of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* if you can cite chapter and verse from *The Lord of the Rings* or *Watchmen* as you can if you “get” Díaz’s submerged homage to Toni Morrison, as Kim’s online annotated guide demonstrates. And so the bilingual Spanish/English reader is at an advantage, the popular culture reader on familiar territory and the literary reader, likewise,



has privileged entry to the text: nobody is completely excluded whilst everyone still has to do some work.

This makes of *Oscar Wao* a tale of transnational and translingual migration that blows all the cherished myths of American identity--from dream to self-invention to bootstrap mobility--to smithereens. And my point is that it does this through its language, its “unpoliced, seditious, inventive, disruptive...” etcetera *textual* practice that connects everything with anything and everybody with another, regardless of creed, colour, or previous condition of servitude or migration status. None of the usual clichés about “immigrant” or “ethnic” or yes, even “multicultural” writing pertain here, because *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is less about narrative than about style—style not as in no-substance style, but as in medium-is-message style, stripping literariness (whatever that is) down to its linguistic *and therefore* (pace Vološinov) social base, which is language as the material of political and cultural signification. As Geoffrey Hartman elaborates of his earlier wound/word nexus: “style means distressing the word, disturbing its sound-shape and semantic stability, marking it individually, even if the result is not only a remarkably rich verbal texture, but also a not always resolvable ambiguity or plurisignificance.” (260)

We may therefore conclude that it is from the linguistic composition of Yunior’s narration all else follows, so that politics in this novel is articulated not just, in Jose David Saldívar’s words, “as an aesthetic practice” but crucially as a *translingual* aesthetic practice that works with the distressed word, the ambiguity, the plurisignificance of languages-in-contact.(18) Díaz’s textual politics of occlusion thus converge seamlessly with the revisionist, fukú-ed up history of the Americas he presents in the opening scene of the *Brief Wondrous*

*Life of Oscar Wao*, beginning with Columbus “hearing divine voices” --but ending with Yunior’s mixed-up, messed-up and all-too-human one.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Amy Kaplan for astute reflection on the political meanings of these by now well-worn phrases.

<sup>2</sup> The term “translingual” is contested and its meanings vary among literary scholars and between literary critics and theorists of creative writing. I use it here not in the sense of a text written in the author’s non-native language (Steven Kellman’s “translingualism”) or in a mix of languages (Lauret’s “multilingualism”), but I follow Bruce Horner et al.’s formulation and take “a translingual approach to multilingual writing” insofar as I am interested in the creative conflicts and convergences that languages-in-contact can produce.

<sup>3</sup> Mukherjee here uncritically adopts the standard, exceptionalist but historiographically outdated narrative of European immigrants of the turn of the twentieth century enthusiastically assimilating to the US and the American way of life; see for a critique of this view for example Jacobson, *Special Sorrows* and *Roots Too* and Lauret.

<sup>4</sup> Rune Graulund provides an insightful analysis of the effect of this rhetorical direct address to the reader.

<sup>5</sup> Several critics have speculated on Yunior’s motivation for telling Oscar’s life story. Richard Patteson for example suggests that Yunior “wants to save his own soul” (15); Emily Shiflette

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argues that Yunior seeks to represent his friend's life as "wondrous" in order to "atone for his complicity in Oscar's death" (4). By far the best critical analysis of Yunior's motivation is Elena Machado Sáez's "Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance," which posits that he himself is the real, if underlying, subject of the narrative.

<sup>6</sup> The novel's title plays on that of Hemingway's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and on the name of Oscar Wilde; the Mirabal sisters are both historical and intertextual: they were involved in the resistance to Trujillo, they figure in Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* and loom large in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Bautista writes that Díaz creates "a tricky but impressive hybrid form" to capture what Mónica Hanna calls "the almost unbelievable nature of the historical reality of the Dominican Republic." (Bautista 52; Hanna 503).

<sup>8</sup> Critical opinion varies as to whether "fukú" is a neologism. José David Sald thinks Díaz invented it, as do I, but Ashley Kunsu, *pace* Michele Wucker, quite persuasively relates it to "'el fucú de Colón'" (the curse of Columbus) "'thought to come from languages spoken in Togo, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone'" and thus hailing directly from Africa, as in *Oscar Wao's* opening sentence. (Saldívar, "Conjectures" 125; Kunsu 222 n.6) Dixa Ramírez by contrast writes that we "'cannot be sure of the word's provenance, but Olliz Boyd also connects it to *fufu*, *fufú*, and *juju*," widely used in the Americas to reference magic. (393) To add to the confusion, Díaz himself mentions, in an interview with Edwidge Danticat, a book-length poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko entitled *Fukú!*, which was reportedly inspired by a visit to the Dominican Republic. (Danticat, "Junot Díaz" 90) Any which way, I think the most

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important resonance is with “fuck(ed) UP,” which is why I describe it as a neologism inspired by American English.

<sup>9</sup> Ashley Kunsu adds to this that Beli’s retort uses the disparaging term “Haitian” here less in the literal sense of dark skin but in the metaphorical one of “acting Haitian.” (217).

<sup>10</sup> Italics original. Vološinov’s importance for the theory of what Lauret calls “wanderwords” or “heterolinguality” in English-language texts is further developed in *Wanderwords*.

<sup>11</sup> On race in the Dominican Republic in relation to Haiti and Díaz’s work see Jose Itzigsohn and Carlos Dore-Cabral; Kunsu; Ramírez; Shifflette and especially Torres-Saillant.

<sup>12</sup> Many critics and Díaz himself, who is a prodigious commentator on his own work, have observed how interjections such as this, as well as footnotes and metatextual remarks on the process of writing Oscar’s biography, are designed to unsettle the authority of Yunió’s narrative voice. See for example the comparison of writers with dictators in *Oscar Wao* itself in footnote 11 (96-7) and critics Patteson and Sáez. See also Jay and the Díaz interview with Meghan O’Rourke.

<sup>13</sup> I find it incomprehensible therefore that Michiko Kakutani the *New York Times* critic wrote of *Wao*’s language that it is “a sort of streetwise brand of Spanglish that even the most monolingual reader can easily inhale.”

<sup>14</sup> Graulund echoes this in saying that “all of these registers are deemed of equal importance.” (35).

<sup>15</sup> Morrisonian references hark back to *BeLoved* and include a description of La Inca as “her own best thing,” for example, a baby “staging a comeback” and rather more crudely, in relation to Beli’s rage: “if there had been a baby nearby she would have thrown that too.” (74, 252, 115)

<sup>16</sup> For examples of such ethnographic heterolinguality see Lauret.

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<sup>17</sup> The title of the Spanish translation of *Drown* is *Los Boys*, which should have been the English title too since it is much more effective in rendering the bilingual, bicultural world of Dominican American youth.

<sup>18</sup> “Todologos” is a fusion of Spanish “todo(s)” (all) and Greek “logos” (word), unexplained and untranslated in the novel. I use it here to denote Díaz’s omnivorous linguistic appetite, what we might also punningly call his “glottony.”

<sup>19</sup> Torres-Saillant writes about the US seeking formal recognition of the Dominican new republic from its inception in 1844 in order to “prevent ‘the further spread of negro influence in the West Indies’” in the words of Secretary of State John C. Calhoun. (127)

<sup>20</sup> A kind of slavery, Yunior reveals, still exists in the “criadas” and “restaveks” he sees on his visits home, house servants who are bought and sold for room and board. (253)

<sup>21</sup> Yunior’s narration is underwritten by lengthy footnotes but also shot through with metatextual references to writing, reconstruction, storytelling, audiorecording, gaps, silences, “páginas en blanco” and even an invitation to the reader to “start the laugh track any time you want.” (171) See also Hanna and O’Rourke as well as Sundaram on this issue.

<sup>22</sup> The word “perejil” however is not foregrounded in the text, but buried in a footnote on page 225.

<sup>23</sup> Italics original; this is Lola’s narration, in the second person: “*I feel it, you say, too loudly. Lo siento.*”

<sup>24</sup> See Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*.

<sup>25</sup> The Dominican secret service under Trujillo, Servicio Inteligencia Militar.

<sup>26</sup> Díaz mentions visiting “regularly” himself in “Writers and Artists Speaking.” (59)

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<sup>27</sup> A classic of this “old immigrant” writing is, for example, Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*.

For an examination of the tropes of the genre see Werner Sollors’ excellent introduction to the Penguin edition and Lauret’s reading of *The Promised Land* in *Wanderwords*. (67-94)

<sup>28</sup> Oscar is rescued redeemed for the cause of hypersexualized Dominican masculinity by his relationship with the prostitute Ybón, which costs him his life at the end of the novel.

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